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Creating Rituals in Stepfamilies

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An important goal of any stepfamily is to develop a sense of who you are as a family. Rituals can help create this feeling of “family.” A ritual is any interaction that is repeated, coordinated, and emotionally meaningful (Doherty, 1997). There are some simple tips to keep in mind when establishing rituals for your stepfamily.

1. Have an open discussion to determine which rituals from past relationships will be used in your new family. Open discussions will allow everyone to provide input, which in turn makes it more likely that everyone will participate in the new ritual.
2. Involve as many family members as possible in these discussions. The discussions themselves help build close relationships and understanding among family members.
3. Rituals that were particularly important in previous families need to be given careful consideration. Changing too many rituals can increase stress and reduce the sense of belonging.
4. Rituals tend to be most effective if they are agreed on by both parents, though the encouragement to participate may follow biological lines.

Creating Rituals

Creating rituals contribute to building a strong stepfamily by giving family members a sense of belonging to a group. Some specific things to consider when creating family rituals include:

- ***Ease into doing things together as a whole stepfamily.*** Participating in activities together will help family members feel comfortable with each other and will also help create memories unique to

your family. Find common ground and choose new activities the family can enjoy together, perhaps something that no one has done before. Hang on to some old traditions, but be careful not to choose activities that are known to create conflict. Do something fun and simple that involves everyone, like getting pizza and a movie on Friday nights, and make a ritual of it.

- ***Continue to spend one-to-one time with your biological children.*** On occasion, plan to do things together without the entire stepfamily. Prior to remarriage, many children had undivided attention from their biological parent. Biological parent-child rituals help children adjust to stepfamily life and affirm they still have their parent’s love and attention.
- ***Spend time doing things with each stepchild.*** Begin with small routine activities together. Then build up to larger planned activities. Respect each child’s wishes if they do not desire to spend time with you, but continue to invite them.
- ***Understand the developmental needs of each child.*** Consider beforehand how children of different ages may feel about and react to family rituals. For example, a newly remarried couple will often plan things to promote closeness, but that sense of closeness may generate conflict with teenagers. Remember that it is normal for teenagers to want to be with their friends or to spend time alone.
- ***Hold family meetings to discuss new rituals.*** Schedule family meetings when you know people will be calm and able to talk. Prepare for these discussions by letting family members know you would like to talk about specific rituals and you

would like feedback. Present your ideas as possibilities rather than a statement of what you want them to do to facilitate discussions. It also works for many families to come to a tentative decision, try out the new ritual, and then schedule a follow-up meeting to get feedback on how it worked and to discuss any changes that would make it better. Giving each child a chance to participate in making and refining new family rituals will help foster a feeling of closeness. Over time, these meetings will build a sense of trust between the various members and increase positive interactions as each person has a say in planning pleasurable events.

- **Learn to be flexible.** Not everyone in your stepfamily will like all the activities you attempt to ritualize. There may be particular activities in which you have less interest, but some of the children find meaningful. Children appreciate it when adults accommodate their different interests.

Types of Rituals

There are three general types of rituals that can be helpful in a remarriage and stepfamily. They are connection, community, and special occasions (Doherty, 1997). Each type has a specific function in family well being.

Connection rituals are frequent, often daily, opportunities for connecting with one or more family members. The benefit of connection rituals is enhanced when every family member is involved in creating and carrying out of the behavior. Almost any behavior can be turned into a connection ritual if the focus is on building a relationship. Examples of connection rituals are:

- Specific greetings when arriving home from work, such as a hug or a kiss
- Verbal expressions of love
- Notes of appreciation in someone's lunch bag
- Family discussions at mealtimes
- Bedtime stories

Community rituals help both the new family and those who associate with them. These rituals help identify you as a new family unit to friends, school teachers, co-workers and neighbors. The benefit to your immediate family is that they create a sense of belonging for each member. Examples may include:

- Attending a stepfamily support group
- Participating in sporting events
- Being involved in a religious organization
- Attending activities with a group of friends

- Organizing extended family gatherings
- Being involved in local volunteer groups

Holiday and celebration rituals are the most recognized type of rituals. Most families have a number of rituals for special occasions. It is particularly important that some rituals from previous families be kept for the sake of consistency and continuity. Consistency is important to children. In addition, rituals unique to the stepfamily can be implemented. Examples of these rituals are:

- Family celebrations on the parents' wedding anniversary
- Birthday celebrations
- Unique holiday celebrations specific to the new family (e.g., decorating, types of presents)
- Short trips or vacations that create feelings and memories of belonging to the new family (e.g., picnics, hikes, unique places to eat)
- Celebrations or parties to mark special family events (e.g., graduations, coming of age, good report cards)

Rituals by themselves will not make or break a family. However, rituals will increase the number of structured and planned opportunities to help stepfamily members develop positive feelings for each other. The time spent planning and carrying out rituals will provide lifelong memories for your children. Remember, when you create rituals unique to your own family, it signifies that you belong together.

Reference

Doherty, W. J. (1997). *The intentional family: Simple rituals to strengthen family ties*. New York: Quill.

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